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ABSTRACT

One of the most memorable eulogies delivered in the United States Senate is the one by Senator Michael Mansfield for President John F. Kennedy. An analysis of his word choice reveals that he (1) forced the audience to participate in the creation of the message; (2) employed active, forceful descriptions; (3) focused on praiseworthy qualities of the President; (4) forced the audience to accept his loss early in the speech, then softened the description at the end; and (5) began with the past and, through his descriptions, forced the audience to accept the present and look toward the future. The use of repetition as well as balance and contrast served to highlight the ideas he wished to communicate, making them stand out from their context. The arrangement united the work, making it a completed whole. This analysis of Mansfield's eulogy gives insight into the functioning of certain stylistic choices in discourse. Particularly interesting are the ways in which the selection of words can stimulate the audience's imagination by presenting a vivid description of events and the way in which omissions in description can force audience participation. Repetition can frame important ideas while balance and contrast can suggest a completeness that is pleasant. More work needs to be done on the way in which stylistic devices secure pragmatic ends. (HOD)

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"RHETORICAL CHOICE IN MANSFIELD's NOVEMBER 25, 1963 EULOGY"

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RHETORICAL CHOICE IN MANSFIELD'S NOVEMBER 25, 1963 EULOGY

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to provide understanding, insight, and evaluation to the stylistic choices of a remarkable discourse; and, second, in doing so, to provide additional support for the contention that stylistic choice can be a powerful pragmatic tool in accomplishing the goals of a discourse, and is not mere ornamentation or embellishment. Style is operationalized as the selection and arrangement of words. Insofar as the two can be separated, they are treated independently. Mansfield's word choice a) provided vivid descriptions of events which stimulated our imagination, and b) forced the audience to actively participate in the creation of the message. His arrangement of words functioned a) to provide unity and progression to the address as a whole, b) to frame important ideas which stood out from their context, and c) to suggest the completeness and thoroughness of his treatment of individual ideas.

RHETORICAL CHOICE IN MANSFIELD'S NOVEMBER 25, 1963 EULOGY

On November 23, 1963, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated. One of the most memorable eulogies delivered in the Senate is the one by Senator Mansfield.[1] Such speeches are often considered "ceremonial," or "speeches of display," which are stylistically distinguishable from other discourses by virtue of their flowery phrases designed merely to ornament the speech and to show off the virtuosity of the speaker. Certainly Mansfield's oration contains unusual patterns of word usage, the hallmark of stylistic devices. However, far from being "mere ornament," the unique stylistic choices found in this discourse function to enhance the speech's effectiveness. This essay explores Mansfield's eulogy to uncover and display its striking stylistic elements and speculates on their probable influence on the impact of this message. Thus, this essay's purpose is twofold: first, to provide understanding, insight, and evaluation to a remarkable discourse's style; and, second, in doing so, to provide additional support for the contention that stylistic choice--far from being mere ornamentation or embellishment--can serve pragmatically to render assistance in the achievement of the speech's end.

The Nature of Style

Ronald Carpenter asserts that "Style in discourse evolves from selection of words and their arrangement in sentences."[2] Along similar lines, Joseph DeVito writes that "Style may be defined as the selection and arrangement of those linguistic features which are open to choice,"[3] explicitly acknowledging

that certain grammatical and syntactical considerations do limit the rhetor's freedom of choice. Swift's idea that style is a matter of "proper words in proper places" is appealing, although it might create the erroneous impression that some choices are right to the exclusion of all other choices.[4] While some choices could be properly judged wrong or inappropriate, others are more a matter of personal preference. It is clear, however, that the notion of style includes both matters of the selection and of the arrangement of words.

It is quite possible for the rhetorical critic to consider a discourse from a stylistic perspective. Douglas Ehninger suggests that rhetorical critics should describe "what is going on in a discourse as it works to achieve its ends."[5] Hermann Stelzner, after considering Ehninger's suggestion, provides us with an example of rhetorical criticism based on the language used in Roosevelt's "War Message." He explains that his criticism "centers on the order, movement, meanings, and interrelationships of the language; the object is to discover not only what goes on, but how it goes on." His analysis is designed to "explore the lexical possibilities of words and word combinations."[6] So too will the present effort explore the choices Mansfield made in his eulogy of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

As much as the two can be separated, this analysis will first consider the selection, and then the arrangement, of words in this discourse. Alternative words and alternative arrangement will be suggested in an attempt to indicate the range of choices available to Mansfield. It should be noted that it is difficult to separate out matters of word selection and matters of idea selection. That is, in order to argue that a given word is a good choice, the idea that it represents must be considered. Thus, while the ultimate purpose in the first section is to assess Mansfield's selection of words to

represent his ideas, inevitably the discussion will at times assess the ideas being represented by those words.

Selection

The sentences of the speech will be considered in the order in which they appear in the eulogy. Words which play key roles will be selected for specific attention in each sentence. Words which are repeatedly used in the same way will, for simplicity, be considered only at their first occurrence. Each of the first five paragraphs begin with the words "There was a . . ." This situates the first section of the address in the past, both because of the past tense and because of the passive construction. This serves to remind us of what was (and consequently, is no more). Thus, Mansfield's speech engenders a sense of loss in the first three words of the speech. The passive construction makes us receivers of action--we have no control over this tragedy.

The key words in the first paragraph are "sound," and even more importantly, "laughter." The word "sound" is not as technical as "vibration." It does not possess the unpleasant connotations of "din," "racket," or "noise." "Laughter" is also a good choice. It is more dignified than "chortling," "tittering," "giggling," or "snorting." Thus, these words are well-chosen, considering some of the alternatives available to Mansfield.

Buy why mention the "sound of laugher" at all--why not simply state that "Kennedy was a happy man"? This would serve to display this praiseworthy quality. The choice Mansfield made is more active. Kennedy was active, he made the "sound of laughter." This contrasts with the silence of death, enhancing the value of his praiseworthy quality, evoking a sense of loss at his death. It appeals directly to our senses, it stimulates our imagination.

We are encouraged to think about the sound of laughter and to become actively involved in the picture he is painting of President Kennedy and his praise-worthy qualities. Notice that Mansfield chooses not to use the words "Kennedy," "the President," or even the pronoun "he" in this opening sentence. We are forced to conjure up an image of the source of laughter, again involving us in the creation of this message.

The first sentence also contains the word "moment." It is preferable to such light alternatives as "trice," "bit," "flash," "twinkling," or "jiffy." Although "minute," "instant," and "second" are possibilities, they do not serve as well for they are too concrete--we knew that it took longer than an instant, a second, or a minute for him to die. "A while" is also imprecise, but perhaps is too colloquial. "Moment" conveys the sense of suspension which many of us felt while awaiting word from Houston on his fate.

This sentence closes with the phrase "it was no more." The laughter did not "stop"--possibly to begin again. His laughter is forever ended. This phrase suggests absence, loss, departure, and, of course, death. We can imagine the silence ringing in our ears. This is a sound our senses will never again experience. Our sense of loss is acute.

The second sentence of this discourse begins with the words "And so . . ." This clearly conveys the idea that the action described subsequently is related to his death and in fact was caused by it. The pronoun "she" is used to identify Mrs. Kennedy. However, once again Mansfield decides not to identify her by name, but to force us to determine who "she" was. Similarly, we are not told that the "ring" mentioned later in the sentence was her wedding band. Mansfield uses every opportunity to force us to become active participants in the construction of his message, to supply information missing from his text. His description of her actions is simple yet vivid and poignant. Mrs. Kennedy's

placement of her wedding band could have been interpreted as rejection of President Kennedy or his memory. If so, this heightens the sense of loss created by Mansfield's words. Sentences four, six, and eight (as well as the first part of sentence ten) are identical and will not be discussed again in this section.[7]

In the eulogy's third sentence, we are told that Kennedy possessed both wit and wisdom. "Wit" is a better choice than such other options as "whimsicality," "burlesque," "banter," or even "humor." Mansfield's selection conveys more sophistication than these possibilities. "Intelligence," "good sense," and "common sense" are possibilities, but "wisdom" seems to include both the "sense" acquired through experience and the "intelligence" to use it well, making it the best choice. "Perspicacity" seems too narrow. "Sanity" would not be a good choice, for his sanity is assumed and not therefore in need of mention. "Reason," "clear thinking," "good judgment," "experience," "practical knowledge," and other choices also lack the combination of experience and intelligence suggested by Mansfield's choice. It alliterates with wit, which may be a small point in its favor. Both wit and wisdom, then, are good choices for praise of the President's mental abilities.

This sentence also contains words which again force the audience into active participation in the construction of the message. The "man" was "neither young nor old." Mansfield could have mentioned his name or office, or suggested that he was "mature." Neither of these possibilities stimulate our imagination in the way the phrase employed does. The fact that he was not old heightens our sense of loss--he had so much life yet to live. However, he was the President of the United States, so he can't really be described as young, either. This is especially true when wit and wisdom are used to characterize his mental abilities.

The statement that his wit was "full of an old man's wisdom and of a child's wisdom" again forces us to integrate these extremes. It also identifies Kennedy's mental abilities as unique, integrating or transcending qualities from those both younger and older than himself. This increases the value of the quality praised here. Mansfield attempts to give Kennedy the best of both worlds.

The fifth sentence declares that this man was "marked with the scars of his love of country." This highlights his courage and patriotism. The word "marked" is more active, more visual and imaginative than "bore," "carried," or "had." His body was "active with the surge of life far, far from spent." These words serve to heighten the sense of loss, reminding us of his relative youth. "Surge" is preferable to such other words such as "swelled," "billowed," or "heaved." It is active, calling up visions of the young President moving, accomplishing tasks, enjoying life. The word "spent" means exhausted. To be far, far from exhausted means full of vigor and activity.

Kennedy's qualities as a parent are praised next. Consistent with the earlier sentences, the President and his children are not identified by name, encouraging the receivers of his message to create their own images of the "father," the "little boy," and the "little girl." Repeated use of "little" to modify the pronouns representing his children in sentence seven functions to heighten our sense of loss, to evoke sorrow for the President's family. This is especially true since they created a "joy of each in the other." "Joy" seems to be a better choice than "amusement," which is less rich and familial, or "gladness," which seems more plain. "Humor" suggests a joking relationship, while "gaiety" may not be as deeply felt as "joy."

Sentence nine praises the qualities Kennedy possessed as a husband. Again, we must identify who the "husband" and the "woman" are. He "wove with

a woman what could not be broken in life." "Wove" is a better option than "interlinked," "intertwined," or "interlaced," for it suggests a greater skill and purpose. It implies a more complex relationship than "dove-tailed" or "sewn." The fact that it added to an alliteration may have been a small factor in its favor. "Broken" is again an active, forceful term. It is stronger than "bruised," "injured," "damaged," or "cracked," and conveys the strength of the relationship they had created. Of course, the stronger the relationship, the more grevious her loss at his death.

The tenth sentence closes the first section by adding "and kissed him and closed the lid of the coffin" to the sentence closing each of the first five paragraphs. This signals the termination of Mansfield's enumeration of the praiseworthy qualities Kennedy possessed in life. Rather than say "Now that he is dead," or something of similar import, Mansfield chooses again to stimulate our imagination by describing the scene at the funeral. We visualize her performing these two acts. Once again Mansfield does not name Mrs. Kennedy This vivid event helps us to end the past as she closes the coffin. This puts the past out of our reach. We must cease mourning for the past and begin to face the present.

Mansfield recognizes the loss we suffered from Kennedy's death by stating that "A piece of each of us died at that moment." His use of the word "moment" suggests that the real suffering had come at Kennedy's death (which had happened "in a moment") rather than at the funeral service or the eulogy. This serves to place distance between ourselves and our suffering.

In order to help us to face the present, Mansfield describes four gifts which Kennedy has left us. Notice that this has the effect of praising Kennedy again; once for his past praiseworthy qualities, and once for the gifts

he left us in the present. Mansfield weaves these together by linking the praiseworthy qualities he possessed in the past with the gifts he left us.

The first gift mentioned is part of his "good heart," which Mansfield suggests is the source of Kennedy's laughter. Of course, he was not referring to the body organ with the word "heart." Rather, he was making reference to Kennedy's character, his soul, or his spirit, the life force which was uniquely his. Terms such as "life force," "spirit," or "soul" are too esoteric or had religious connotations which were not appropriate in this context, and which the word "heart" avoids. The adjective "good" reinforces the fact that this is a gift to be valued. Notice that Mansfield continues to refrain from identifying Kennedy by name or office, forcing us to supply that information.

The second gift is his "profound wit" which is the source of his great leadership. This is awkward, the first flaw in the discourse. First, Mansfield introduces a new praiseworthy quality, "leadership." Second, our gift is not the new item (in this case, leadership), but the one mentioned in the first section. This is inconsistent with his first gift (the new item, a "good heart") and mars the smooth development of the two parts of the discourse. However, there are reasons for such a choice. Mansfield was correct in not identifying laughter as the present in the first sentence; we were not in the mood to appreciate a gift of "laughter" under these circumstances, although a gift of a "good heart" was appropriate. Similarly, we are not all leaders, so we can appreciate a gift of a "profound wit" more than a gift of "leadership." Thus, his choices were dictated by the circumstances, and were not optimal for the form of the speech.

The third gift is not as clearly linked with earlier ones as the first two. This is another weakness in the address. We received a "kindness and

strength" which he "fused into a human courage to seek peace without fear." This relates to his bravery and patriotism represented by the "scars of his love of country." However, service to the country in war is not exactly the same as leadership of the country in foreign affairs. Hence, this relates more to the new quality introduced in the previous sentence. "Kindness" and "strength" are good choices. The former is preferable to such alternatives as "kindliness," "benevolence," and the latter is a better selection than "sound," "hale," or "hearty." "Powerful" means possession of power. We know that "power corrupts," and the power inheres in the office while strength inheres in the man, good reasons for Mansfield's choice. They each gain from the association, for the kindness cannot stem from weakness if we are also given strength, and the strength is not likely to be abused if we are given kindness. Similarly, none can deny that the desire for peace is praiseworthy, especially when it does not arise from weakness or fear.

The fourth gift is one of "love," which was exemplified in both his relationship with his wife and the joy of himself and his children in one another. This is a valued gift, but he breaks the pattern of discussing its source or its consequence. Instead, he suggests that we might give love to others. This serves to identify us with Kennedy, for not only would we be "givers" just as he was, but we would in fact give the same gift (i.e., love). Thus, we partake of the same praiseworthy qualities Mansfield ascribes to Kennedy.

Mansfield does not stop with recounting the gifts that Kennedy gave to us. If we sufficiently give love "to one another", that can effect revenge for Kennedy's death. Mansfield is not so crass as to suggest that we try to seek revenge on his actual killer, but that we attempt to fight the societal forces of "bigotry, . . . hatred, prejudice, and . . . arrogance which

converged in the moment of horror to strike him down." Several things deserve mention. First, Mansfield continues to avoid direct references to Kennedy beyond the pronoun "he" (or "him"). We must participate in the construction of the message. Second, Mansfield manages to introduce more praise of Kennedy, though it is less direct than before. By deciding to identify these forces against Kennedy, we realize that Kennedy must have had good qualities for such things as "bigotry," "hatred," "prejudice," and "arrogance," to be arrayed against him. Although "prejudice" is of somewhat broader application that "bigotry," to use two such highly related terms served to place special emphasis on Kennedy's civil rights policies. Of course, viewed in the context of these two terms, "hatred" and "arrogance" certainly apply to racism and thus serve to further underline Kennedy's civil rights activism as a praiseworthy quality without specifically, explicitly mentioning it. Mansfield's decision to use the word "moment" again reinforces the idea that our pain and suffering should be tied to the moment of his death, and that we should be recovering from it by now. "Strike" is an active, powerful word, continuing Mansfield's tendency to provide vivid, imaginative descriptions. "Converged" is also a good choice, for it suggests four independent forces rushing toward Kennedy from various directions, which he alone had no power to halt. Only if we all give love to one another can this terrible alignment of forces be stopped.

The final section begins with sentence eighteen, in which Kennedy is described as "leaving us." One who leaves could conceivably return. Mansfield decided not to begin the sentence with something like, "In death . . ." Thus, for the first time he chooses to ease his description of Kennedy's death. This choice of word also allows Mansfield to link Kennedy's "leaving" with

the gifts he "leaves with us." Thus, this emphasizes once again that these gifts are compensation for his death--not sufficient compensation, but something we might not have were it not for his death, and thus some good can come out of even the worst horror.

This softened description of the President's death is consistent with Mansfield's allusion to Kennedy, asking him the questions of the next two sentences. In sentence eighteen, Kennedy is finally addressed both by name and office. This leads to the questions of sentences nineteen and twenty: "Will we take them, Mr. President? Will we have, now, the sense and the responsibility and the courage to take them?" This suggests for the first time that we must "take" the gifts, not merely "receive" them. Some action on our part is required. Repeating the question with the addition of conditions--"the sense and the responsibility and the courage"--indicates that this is not an easy question to answer, that considerable effort will be required on our part to "take" them. Inclusion of the word "now" indicates that we had the opportunity to take them in the past, but failed to. This implies that we are responsible for Kennedy's death--if we had taken them in the past, the forces which converged to strike him down would have been eliminated. However, this implication is so subtle that it is unlikely to engender guilt, but rather serve as motivation to take the gifts.

The final sentence of the eulogy includes a prayer to God, which is quite appropriate in such a speech. However, Mansfield takes this opportunity to stress both the value of the gifts (why else would he bother to pray to God that we take them?) and the difficulty of obtaining them (it must be difficult for God's intervention to be needed). This final section also serves to take us out of the present and orients us to the future, for it is in the future that we must take the gifts, in the future that "under God we will" take them.

This analysis reveals that Mansfield has selected useful, functional words in his address. He forces us to participate in the creation of the message. He employs active, forceful description. Mansfield's words focus on praiseworthy qualities of the President. He forces us to accept his loss early in the speech, then softens the description at the end. He begins with the past and through his descriptions, forces us to accept the present and finally to look toward the future. The only awkward section is in the middle, where he is inconsistent. He begins by linking Kennedy's praiseworthy qualities with the gifts he has left us, but which fails to follow the pattern he initiates in sentences twelve and thirteen. Mansfield's selection of words, insofar as it can be assessed apart from his arrangement of them, is, in general, excellent.

Arrangement

This little speech has an incredibly complex structure. First, as discussed before, it can be divided into three sections. The first describes the praiseworthy qualities Kennedy once possessed. In the second section, Kennedy's gifts to us are enumerated, which of course serves to praise him again. This is especially true when Mansfield suggests that his gifts could be turned against the forces arrayed against him. The final section looks to the future, addressing Kennedy and praying that we will take the gifts and use them. His speech manages to accomplish this progression from the past to the future without benefit of previews or transitions, which is a result both of its brevity and its tightly knit structure.

Repetition plays a large role in unifying the discourse, especially in the first and largest section. The first five paragraphs all begin with "There was a . . ." praiseworthy quality. First, this eliminates the need for

previews or transitions; each time we see (or hear) the phrase "There was a . . ." we know that another quality was being ascribed to Kennedy. This construction "There was a . . ." focuses on the qualities, not the man or the way in which he possessed them.

The remainder of the paragraphs is also identical "in a moment, it was no more. And so she took a ring from her finger and placed it in his hands." This also provides unity to the first section. It serves to heighten our sense of loss, for each time Mansfield describes another praiseworthy quality, it is followed by a saddening description of the widow at his funeral. As mentioned before, it is the addition to this repeated sentence--"and kissed him and closed the lid of a coffin"--which signals the end of this first section. Thus, repetition ties the first section together and the repeated sentences frame each of his praised traits, epmhasizing them and then the break in the pattern completes the section.

Repetition is also important in the second section. The four gifts are all introduced with the phrase "He gave us of . . ." a gift. This construction serves to frame the gifts, for our attention is drawn to that which differs from its context. Furthermore, the special construction--"He gave us of . . ."--focuses attention on the gifts, not on the giver or on the act of giving. The preposition "of" suggests that he gave part <u>of</u> himself, not merely that he gave things he possessed.

Repetition is less prominent in the third section. He repeats the question he asks of Kennedy, which serves to provide emphasis to the importance of taking. His prayer hopes that "we shall and . . . we will," which again increases the importance of the act of taking. It does not provide the same earlier qualities of unity and emphasis.

This discourse also possesses an extraordinary amount of balance, again predominating the first and longest section. The description of his qualities, which is the focus of the first section, is followed by the description of Mrs. Kennedy. This balances the past with the present (or near present). Also, the qualities, which presumable took some time to develop, contrast sharply with the "moment" in which they were extinguished. The "moment," an abstract description, also contrasts with the concrete images of Kennedy's traits (the sound of laughter, the mark of his scars). In one sentence, sound (of laughter) is balanced against the silence (it was no more). Old and young occur twice in the third sentence. In the fifth sentence, the "surge of life" is connected with death (it was not more). Again, youth (his boy and girl) is paired with age (father). Kennedy as a husband is juxtaposed with his wife in the ninth sentence.

In the second section, we find balance and contrast again. Here we find in sentence thirteen "good heart" and "laughter," and in fourteen, "wit" and "leadership." "Kindness" and "strength" combine to form "courage," which allows us to seek "peace without fear." Finally, his gift to us allows us to give "in turn." Balance and contrast add a symmetry, a completeness which is pleasing. It gives an impression of thoroughness, of unity, to the ideas of the work.

Thus, the arrangement Mansfield employed served to highlight the idea he wished to communicate, making them stand out from their context. The arrangement united the work, making it seem a completed whole. His word order also included much balance and contrast, which provide individual ideas with a sense of completeness and thoroughness, of unity. This discourse is quite finely structured.

This analysis not only provides insight and evaluation of Mansfield's eulogy of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, but also gives insight into the functioning of certain stylistic choices in discourse. Particularly interesting are the ways in which selection of words can stimulate the audience's imagination by presenting a vivid description of events and the way in which omissions in description can force audience participation (reminiscent of Aristotle's notion that the audience can participate in the construction of an enthymematic arugment).[8] Repetition can frame important ideas, for we tend to be drawn to that which differs from its context. Balance and contrast seem to suggest a completeness and thoroughness which is pleasant. More work needs to be done on the way in which stylistic devices secure pragmatic ends, but this should serve as a contribution.[9]

Notes

[1]Senator Michael Mansfield, "Printing of Eulogies to Late President John F. Kennedy," Congressional Record 109(November 25, 1963), p. 22695.

[2]Ronald H. Carpenter, "The Problem of Style in Presidential Discourse," in Concepts in Communication, edited by Jimmie D. Trent, Judith S. Trent, and Daniel J. O'Neill (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1973), P. 112.

[3]Joseph A. DeVito, "Style and Stylistics: An Attempt at Definition," Quarterly Journal of Speech 53(October 1967), p. 249 (italics omitted).

[4]Jonathan Swift, "A Letter to a Young Clergyman," in Theories of Style, edited by Lane Cooper (New York, 1907), p. 161, quoted in DeVito, p. 248.

[5]Douglas Ehninger, "Rhetoric and the Critic," Western Speech 29(Fall 1965), p. 230.

[6]Hermann G. Stelzner, "'War Message,' December 8, 1941: An Approach to Language," Speech Monographs 33(November 1966), reprinted in Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Approach, edited by Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), p. 300.

[7]The fact that sentence eight and not seven includes the phrase "In a moment it was no more," is probably just a difference in punctuation of the written copy. This is not a significant difference in stylistic choices.

[8]See, e.g., Lloyd F. Bitzer, "Aristotle's Enthymeme Revisited," Quarterly Journal of Speech 45(December 1959), pp. 399-408.

[9]Another work which is useful in this regard is Michael Osborn, Orientations to Rhetorical Style (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976).